

Lian, the Evening of the Death

The scream nearly escaped her lips. She caught it at the last second, imagining what everyone would say if she lost control—this trembling woman standing by the corpse, especially after their vicious argument that afternoon. Midnight was approaching. Her team had four days to submit a campaign proposal for a large, important client. It was a highly demanding tender in the field of wearable technologies, the kind of hot topic making waves globally—and in their own little pond.

The kind of tender that comes along once in a lifetime—where the outcome could determine whether they'd be working from a gleaming high-rise with its own gym and massage rooms, or from the lower floor of a peeling building in South Tel Aviv. Or worse: one of Tel Aviv's satellite towns. Most agencies had already been eliminated in the early rounds. Only two remained for the final stage: her agency, Archetype, and their major rival, Kolga.

Everyone on the campaign was still at the office, each polishing the proposal from their own angle. Lian coordinated it all as senior account manager—the bridge between agency and client.

She carried what she called her "operations binder"—a thick folder packed with everything—research, focus group summaries, global industry reviews, strategy proposals from the planning department that handled advertising strategies, and scientists' assessments of the product's potential and risks. It also held sketches from various stages of the work. The younger staff had already begun using the papers mostly as doodle pads during meetings—the real work was on their laptops.

But Lian still stuck with printed copies "that could be handed out in meetings, much more convenient," as she kept telling her account assistant.

Passing Alex's room, she noticed the door slightly ajar, though no one was inside. Surprising—Alex always made sure to lock his door when he left. Trust wasn't his strong suit, and it had weakened further now that he was about to become creative director. He was convinced everyone was fishing for his ideas, trying to steal credit from him.

Lian peered through the doorway, then gathered her courage and stepped inside, curiosity winning out. The air was stale—that particular funk of a room shut up for days, mixed with the distinctive aroma from an ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts on the low coffee table. An artist's easel stood beside it, bearing campaign sketches defaced with thick red X's. All rejected.

A haphazard pile of objects beyond the desk caught her eye. She'd taken just one step toward it when she saw him. Alex lay on his back between the sofa and the worktable, motionless. Dread surged through her. He wasn't moving. Her body locked mid-step, mouth open, breath coming in sharp, shallow pulls—something constricted her throat. Her heart slammed against her ribs. For one split second she stood paralyzed, staring.

Even through the shock, Lian registered Alex's face twisted in pain, his right hand frozen mid-gesture, fingers splayed across his stomach. A half-empty sushi box lay beside him. She hurried to bend over him, trying to check his condition—and jerked back. His face was cold. Panic hardened into something solid, suffocating. Almost against her will, she reached for the side of his neck again. The certainty hit her all at once: no pulse.

"Lian," came the call from the office doorway. Yaron stood clutching a fresh sketch from the graphic designer, eyes red-rimmed from sleeplessness. She roused from her paralysis and, with great difficulty, murmured, "Here, Yaron, in Alex's office."